

VZCZCXRO4822
PP RUEHLN RUEHVK RUEHYG
DE RUEHYE #0106/01 0421208
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
P 111208Z FEB 08 ZDK
FM AMEMBASSY YEREVAN
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 6974
INFO RUCNCIS/CIS COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
RUEHAK/AMEMBASSY ANKARA PRIORITY 1441
RUEHLMC/MILLENNIUM CHALLENGE CORPORATION WASHINGTON DC
RUEHNO/USMISSION USNATO 0522

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 06 YEREVAN 000106

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR EUR/CARC

SENSITIVE

SIPDIS

E.O.12958: N/A

TAGS: [PHUM](#) [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [EAID](#) [SOCI](#) [KDEM](#) [KPAO](#) [KJUS](#) [KWMN](#) [AM](#)

SUBJECT: ELECTION SEASON HUMAN RIGHTS ROUND-UP (JANUARY-FEBRUARY)

REFS: A) YEREVAN 90 B) YEREVAN 86 C) 07 YEREVAN 1446 D) 07 YEREVAN

1335 E) 07 YEREVAN 1338 F) 07 YEREVAN 1362

YEREVAN 00000106 001.2 OF 006

SENSITIVE BUT UNCLASSIFIED. NOT FOR INTERNET DISTRIBUTION. PLEASE
HANDLE ACCORDINGLY.

11. (SBU) In light of the current presidential election in Armenia,
scheduled for Tuesday, February 19, this issue of Yerevan's Human
Rights Round-up is exclusively dedicated to reported and alleged
election-related violations. Reports are organized chronologically.

This issue's headlines:

HEADLINES

-- GYUMRI PRESS CLUB ALLEGES ARSON ATTEMPT ON OFFICE
-- PROSECUTOR GENERAL CREATES ELECTORAL FRAUD UNIT
-- ORINATS YERKIR OFFICE IN VANADZOR VANDALIZED
-- LTP SUPPORTERS DETAINED AFTER RALLY SCUFFLE IN TALIN
-- POLICE CLOSE LTP OFFICE IN KAPAN (SOUTHERN ARMENIA)
-- LTP CAMPAIGN ALLEGES VIOLATION OF RIGHT TO ASSEMBLY
-- POLICE IMPOUND CARS FROM LTP'S MOTORCADE
-- LTP OFFICE IN YEREVAN DISTRICT SET ABLAZE
-- OSCE CRITICIZES IMBALANCED TV COVERAGE OF OPPOSITION
-- PROSECUTOR GENERAL'S OFFICE SHOT AT
-- LTP OFFICE ATTACKED IN VANADZOR (NORTHERN ARMENIA)
-- ALLEGATIONS OF VOTE-RIGGING IN GYUMRI
-- HUMAN RIGHTS OMBUDSMAN DISCOURAGES VOTE-SELLING
-- LTP CAMP CRIES FOUL ON FORMATION OF GRIEVANCE BODY
-- REPUBLICAN PARTY OFFICES SHOT AT IN YEREVAN, VILLAGE
-- BAGHDASSARIAN ALLEGES DEATH THREAT MADE AGAINST HIM
-- ELECTION MONITOR NGO CONCERNED ABOUT VOTER LISTS
-- VIOLENCE MARS LTP RALLY IN ARTASHAT (ARARAT REGION)
-- YPC MEDIA MONITORING FINDINGS: DISTORTED COVERAGE
-- LPT ACTIVISTS BEATEN IN YEREVAN, HOSPITALIZED

GYUMRI PRESS CLUB ALLEGES ARSON ATTEMPT ON OFFICE

12. (U) On January 22, the Gyumri Journalists' Club "Asparez"
released a statement accusing unidentified individuals of attempting
to set fire to its office in the early morning of January 19 when a
piece of cloth, soaked in petrol and set ablaze, was thrown at one

of their windows. Part of the window burned and the glass cracked as a result of the incident, before the fire was extinguished.

13. (U) In its statement, "Asparez" noted that it had resolved not to take the issue to the police, given its negative track record with previous police investigations of attempted trespassing in 2002-2006 that had yielded no results. Police launched an investigation anyway, in response to media reports of the incident. On its website, "Asparez" announced a USD 1,000 reward for information about the attack.

14. (SBU) "Asparez" is closely affiliated with the embattled GALA TV station, whose coverage of LTP in October, 2007 landed it in trouble with the authorities, who have since investigated and charged the TV station with tax evasion and illegal use of a Gyumri TV broadcast tower. (NOTE: While court proceedings against GALA have been in abeyance since mid-December, the independent TV station has continued to broadcast, and has been actively sought out by opposition candidates and their party to cover their campaign events. END NOTE.) The head of "Asparez" and GALA's owner are close acquaintances who have worked together to protest the actions taken against GALA. Asparez also seems to have aligned itself with the LTP campaign.

PROSECUTOR GENERAL CREATES ELECTORAL FRAUD UNIT

15. (U) On January 23 the office of the prosecutor general reported that it had formed an ad hoc unit tasked with preventing and swiftly reacting to possible instances of fraud in the upcoming presidential election. Aram Tamazian, the Deputy Prosecutor General in charge of the unit's work, said the unit's source of information would be reports of fraud and allegations appearing in Armenian media. Tamazian said the new unit had seen no evidence of serious violations so far, and noted that most of the cases reviewed to this point were "too general" to warrant criminal proceedings. He told assembled journalists he hoped "that reports by our media outlets

YEREVAN 00000106 002.2 OF 006

will be more substantive so we can display a more concrete approach."

ORINATS YERKIR OFFICE IN VANADZOR VANDALIZED

16. (U) On the night of January 24, unidentified vandals broke the windows of the opposition Orinats Yerkir (Rule of Law) party campaign office in Vanadzor, and destroyed its campaign posters. The prosecutor's office launched a criminal investigation into the incident.

LTP SUPPORTERS DETAINED AFTER RALLY SCUFFLE IN TALIN

17. (U) Following a January 27 scuffle between LTP supporters and a heckler who challenged LTP at a rally he was holding in the town of Talin in central Armenia, police arrested four LTP supporters on charges of battery. Shortly thereafter, however, police changed the charges to "hooliganism," which carries much stiffer penalties, ranging up to five years of imprisonment. The LTP campaign described the incident as a government "provocation," and demanded the immediate release of its loyalists. LTP's campaign manager Alexander Arzumanyan alleged that Sargis Karapetyan, the heckler whom LTP supporters tried to physically remove from the rally, was a known provocateur who was carrying out the authorities' order to disturb the rally.

18. (SBU) All of those detained were Armenian veterans of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. On January 30, two parliament deputies affiliated with the opposition Heritage party, which is led by the American-born ethnic Armenian Raffi Hovannisian, visited the detainees but were unsuccessful in obtaining their release. On January 31, three other lawmakers, also war veterans and members of

pro-government parties, visited Talin for the same purpose. Two of them, Sasun Mikaelian and Hakob Hakobian, are from the ruling Republican Party. Mikaelian and the third parliamentarian, Rustam Gasparian, are also leading members of the Yerkrpah Union of Karabakh war veterans that challenged President Kocharian's rule after the October, 1999 assassinations of eight Armenian leaders in parliament. As of February 8, however, only one out of the four detained LTP supporters had been released, reportedly due to the intervention of General Manvel Grigoryan, Armenia's deputy Minister of Defense and leader of the Yerkrpah Union.

¶9. (U) Referring to the scuffle in Talin, President Kocharian, who has been an aggressive supporter of Sargsian in media interviews, told the press on February 1 that "everyone must understand that in the pre-electoral period the criminal code is not suspended, just the opposite." He added that "During this period law enforcement bodies must be stricter in applying sanctions to avoid letting small incidents get out of hand. Law enforcement agencies must investigate all violations of order, and inform the public what is being done in each case."

POLICE CLOSE LTP OFFICE IN KAPAN (SOUTHERN ARMENIA)

¶10. (U) According to media reports, on January 28 police in the southeastern Armenian town of Kapan used force to close the campaign office of former President Levon Ter-Petrossian. The Ter-Petrossian campaign had leased the office in late December, but according to LTP's Kapan campaign chief, the owner of the office unexpectedly decided to end the lease agreement despite being paid two months' rent in advance. According to reports, the owner had been under pressure from local authorities and police to take this move. Over 15 police officers reportedly used force to remove LTP's supporters from the premises, sealed the door and refused to let campaign workers remove any equipment or other items from the office. The police apparently did not deny their involvement in the closure, issuing a statement claiming they had intervened in a confrontation between the owner and individuals who had occupied his property "by fraudulent means."

LTP CAMPAIGN ALLEGES VIOLATION OF RIGHT TO ASSEMBLY

¶11. (U) LTP'S campaign headquarters in Yerevan reported that the Yerevan Mayor's office had denied them the right to free assembly by preventing a large-scale rally in Yerevan planned for February 17. LTP's headquarters maintain that shortly after 9:00 am on January

YEREVAN 00000106 003.2 OF 006

28, its supporters personally went to the Yerevan Municipality, as required by law, to inform the city of their intention to hold a rally February 17 in Yerevan's Freedom Square. (NOTE: February 17 is the last day of legal campaigning allowed before the election. END NOTE.)

¶12. (U) LTP's supporters claim they were the first to apply for the venue on that date, but the Municipality rejected their application, stating that an application had been received earlier that day by the Republican Party to hold a rally on the same day at the same venue. The Municipality also denied their request to hold a gathering at a different location, contending that it was not suitable to have two events on the same day in two adjacent locations. Nonetheless, according to a press report, the Municipality subsequently authorized the People's Party of Tigran Karapetyan to hold a rally at this alternative location on February 17.

POLICE IMPOUND CARS FROM LTP MOTORCADE

¶13. (U) On January 29, following a surprise motorcade tour through Yerevan's downtown streets by LTP supporters the day before, police impounded five of the cars that had taken part, including those of

the chairmen of the Hanrapetutyun (Republic) and Armenian National Movement parties, Aram Sargsyan and Ararat Zurabyan, who have thrown their support behind LTP. A police statement noted that the motorcade had disrupted traffic in the city center, that participants in the motorcade had defied orders by road police, and that threats of force had been made against the police. It said a criminal case had been opened against the offenders on charges of "violence against a representative of the authorities," and "hooliganism."

¶14. (SBU) President Kocharian emphasized that traffic rules during the election campaign have not been suspended, noting that the cars following LTP into Yerevan on January 29 posed a danger to other drivers. Kocharian told the press that he personally had witnessed what happened at one downtown intersection, as his car had been caught in traffic nearby. Kocharian fumed that "It was impudence, and I think such impudence must be prevented by state institutions and those who are guilty must be punished accordingly."

LTP OFFICE IN YEREVAN DISTRICT SET ABLAZE

¶15. (U) According to a report from LTP's main campaign headquarters, on the night of January 29 a fire was started by unknown individuals at LTP's campaign office in the Silikyan district located in western Yerevan. The district is home to two polling stations.

OSCE CRITICIZES IMBALANCED TV COVERAGE OF OPPOSITION

¶16. (U) In its first interim assessment of the pre-election campaign issued on January 30, the Election Observation Mission (EOM) of OSCE's Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) criticized the "clear imbalance" in coverage of presidential candidates by various TV, radio, and print media, including public television. (Note: Armenian public television is the most widely-watched TV channel in the country, with the greatest broadcast reach, and is relied on by citizens as one of their primary sources of news. End note.) The EOM assessed that most of the seven TV channels it monitored devoted coverage to Sargsian that "exceeded what could be reasonably considered appropriate." The EOM also found that "in contrast to the almost exclusively positive or neutral coverage afforded to Sargsian, Levon Ter-Petrossian was regularly portrayed in a negative light."

PROSECUTOR GENERAL'S OFFICE SHOT AT

¶17. (U) On January 31 the press service of the Office of the Prosecutor General reported that an unknown gunman had shot at its headquarters in Yerevan during the night. The press service described the incident as an attempt to "destabilize the situation" in the country prior to the presidential election. A spokesperson said the single gunshot was fired from a Makarov pistol and shattered the window of a third-floor room where Prosecutor General Aghvan Hovsepian and his top aides usually hold their meetings. A criminal inquiry has been launched by the agency's Special

YEREVAN 00000106 004.2 OF 006

Investigative Unit. "The Prosecutor-General's Office will continue to coordinate the fight against crime within the framework of its duties in order to enforce laws and maintain public security," the same spokesperson said in a statement. The incident occurred just hours after Prosecutor General Hovsepian's sedan was hit by another car as it drove through central Yerevan. A spokesperson said the driver of the car that hit Hovsepian's vehicle was detained on the spot and found to be drunk.

LTP OFFICE ATTACKED IN VANADZOR (NORTHERN ARMENIA)

¶18. (U) On the night of January 31 in the northern city of Vanadzor,

Armenia's third largest population center after Yerevan and Gyumri, unidentified assailants threw two Molotov cocktails at the entrance to LTP's Vanadzor campaign office. A fire broke out on the adjoining staircase as a result of the explosion. The night guard managed to extinguish the fire and prevent its spread. On February 1, the Lori region's prosecutor's office launched a criminal case on charges of "willful destruction of property." Earlier, on the night of January 27, signs and posters posted outside LTP's local and regional campaign headquarters - located across the street from each other - were reportedly destroyed. The prosecutor's office reported it had collected evidence related to these incidents, but it is unclear whether a criminal case has been launched.

ALLEGATIONS OF VOTE-RIGGING IN GYUMRI

¶19. (U) On January 31 during a press conference at the Asparez Journalists' Club in the northern city of Gyumri, the campaign chair of the Orinats Yerkir (Rule of Law) opposition party and member of parliament Hovhannes Margarian alleged vote-rigging by the authorities (ref A). He presented a copy of a spreadsheet he confidentially acquired from a Gyumri businessman that is allegedly

SIPDIS

being used by the authorities to obtain voters' passport details and voters' pledges to vote for Prime Minister Sargsian. Margarian alleged that the spreadsheet was being distributed by workers of the Gyumri tax department to businessmen around the city. The spreadsheet's header bore the letterhead of the Gyumri Department of Armenia's State Tax Service. According to Margarian, each businessman who is being approached is being ordered to complete and return voting details for 20 voters (including their signatures).

HUMAN RIGHTS OMBUDSMAN DISCOURAGES VOTE-SELLING

¶20. (U) During a February 1 press conference, Armen Harutiunian, Armenia's human rights defender, or ombudsman, urged Armenian voters not to sell their votes during the upcoming presidential election. Expressing his office's concern about a practice which he says took root in previous elections, Harutiunian said he feared that vote buying is "a phenomenon which can abort the establishment of democracy in Armenia." He then issued a call to Armenian citizens "to be mindful of this and avoid selling their votes." The ombudsman's warnings came amid similar concerns expressed by the main opposition candidates contesting the presidency. As was the case in the run-up to the May, 2007 parliamentary elections, there have been allegations that government loyalists have visited citizens to collect their passport details in a bid to influence votes.

LTP CAMP CRIES FOUL ON FORMATION OF GRIEVANCE BODY

¶21. (U) In a related development, LTP's campaign manager on February 1 condemned PM Sargsian's December 4 decision to set up a special government body tasked with looking into written complaints and requests lodged by citizens. "The working group is part of the prime minister's campaign team, and comprises experienced state officials," said Aleksandr Arzumian. Arzumian alleged that the group's mission is to address voters' grievances in return for their pledge to vote for Sarkisian. He said as many as 10,000 Armenians have already applied to the body, asking for financial assistance and jobs. According to Arzumian, application forms for such requests are being distributed to the population by young activists of a small pro-government party campaigning for Sargsian's victory in the February 19 election. That party, the United National Liberal Party (MIAK), is led by an aide to the Prime Minister.

YEREVAN 00000106 005.2 OF 006

REPUBLICAN PARTY OFFICES SHOT AT IN YEREVAN, VILLAGE

¶22. (U) Two Yerevan campaign offices belonging to the ruling Republican Party led by Prime Minister Sargsian were shot at in the early hours of February 1. One incident occurred at approximately two o'clock in the morning when unidentified assailants shot twice at Sargsian's campaign office located in the Nor Nork district, breaking the office windows. The second shooting occurred around the same time near Sargsian's campaign office in a different district when a gunshot broke the windows of a hair salon located above the office. Criminal cases were launched immediately. Another shooting incident occurred January 30 in Sargsian's campaign headquarters in Haghtanak village (located within Yerevan's municipality). A person named S. Haroyan entered the campaign office, shot at the walls and a TV, and demanded to see the local campaign chief. He left a half hour later and was arrested the following day for "hooliganism." He subsequently admitted his guilt and said he had been drunk at the time of the incident.

BAGHDASSARIAN ALLEGES DEATH THREAT MADE AGAINST HIM

¶23. (U) During his first major rally in Yerevan's Freedom Square on February 3, opposition candidate Artur Baghdassarian of the Orinats Yerkir (Rule of Law) party claimed to have received a death threat from the Armenian authorities (ref A). Without disclosing the source of the threat, Baghdassarian told 10,000-15,000 rally supporters that he had received the threat just hours after a Saturday, February 2 news conference in which he pointedly declined to rule out the possibility of withdrawing his candidacy in favor of Ter-Petrosian.

¶24. (U) Despite a statement made February 4 by Prime Minister Sargsian in which he dismissed the claim as a campaign ploy, law enforcement bodies nonetheless launched an investigation. According to Heghine Bisharian, Baghdassarian's campaign manager, Baghdassarian met February 7 at his Yerevan party headquarters with the head of the criminal investigations directorate of the police to discuss the threat. Baghdassarian told RFE/RL on February 6 that another law enforcement agency, the National Security Service, had offered to provide him with bodyguards, and that he had accepted the offer.

ELECTION MONITOR NGO CONCERNED ABOUT VOTER LISTS

¶25. (U) On February 4 the domestic election monitor NGO "It's Your Choice," which will carry out the largest local observation mission during the presidential election, expressed its concern over the state of the preliminary voters' lists, which they claimed revealed serious deficiencies. Hambartsum Harutyunyan, the director of the NGO, said there were cases of non-inclusion of male citizens who had completed their military service, as well as inclusion on the list of deceased voters. He also noted that some lists appeared to omit registered voters occupying entire buildings. Harutyunyan did not provide specific numbers to back up his organization's claims.

VIOLENCE MARS LTP RALLY IN ARTASHAT (ARARAT REGION)

¶26. (SBU) Violence erupted at a LTP rally held in the city of Artashat in the Ararat region on February 6 when government supporters reportedly assaulted LTP loyalists with ice, stones and concrete debris. According to a statement from LTP's campaign headquarters, "a group of hooligans" threw the objects not only at rally participants, but also at the platform where LTP and his aides were standing. Several newspapers reported that the nephew of Deputy Prime Minister Hovik Abrahamian, who is also the campaign manager for Sargsian, led those who assaulted the LTP supporters. The controversial Abrahamian, who also is Armenia's Minister of Territorial Governance, is reported to have large-scale business holdings in Artashat.

¶27. (U) The papers also report that police officers and Alik Sargsian, Ararat's governor, were at the scene but made no visible

attempt to stop the violence. Ter-Petrosian's statement also notes that the assailants started to throw stones at Ter-Petrosian's car, after which seven or eight unidentified individuals attacked the deputy head of his presidential security detail. The security officer was then taken to the hospital with a head injury. Ter-Petrosian and his aides filed a report with local police, and

YEREVAN 00000106 006.2 OF 006

demanded that the perpetrators be identified.

128. (U) Pro-government media and law enforcement authorities offered a different version of events, however. The police stated that Ter-Petrosian himself provoked the violence by making offensive remarks about "some officials." (Note: LTP was repeatedly using the deputy prime minister's derogatory nickname, Muk (Mouse), in his speeches in Artashat and other Ararat towns and villages. End Note.)

Newspapers also report that, according to the Office of the Prosecutor General, Artashat's police department received complaints from two local women who claimed they were attacked by LTP supporters and received bruises. Police ordered a medical examination. Pro-LTP media said the women were from Serzh Sargsian's local campaign headquarters, and that they were paid 5,000 AMD (approximately USD 18) each to try to disrupt the rally.

129. (SBU) A statement released by the police said that "Three participants in the rally demanded an end to unethical and offensive statements, in response to which four or five young men supporting the organizers of the event jostled, hit and knocked them to the ground, causing physical injuries. Supporters of the victims resorted to retaliatory actions." The statement also claimed that the Artashat police stepped in and "quickly brought the situation under control. The identity of the individuals involved in the incident has been ascertained and they have been detained." The police have launched a criminal case, on charges of hooliganism, but it remains unclear who will be charged. The OSCE's EOM announced after the incident that it will conduct its own investigation of the case, and will include its findings in its next interim assessment. (COMMENT: PolOffs were touring the region the day of the incident, and had met with the governor several hours before it occurred. While waiting for their meeting with the governor, one of his aides told PolOffs that they anticipated the LTP gathering would be "tense" in light of the harsh rhetoric of LTP and his entourage that has been increasingly directed against the government. END COMMENT.)

YPC MEDIA MONITORING FINDINGS: DISTORTED TV COVERAGE

130. (SBU) On February 6 the Yerevan Press Club published its interim media monitoring report for the period of January 21-30 (the first ten days of the presidential election campaign). According to the findings, the media provided considerably more time to opposition candidates contesting the presidency than during the first period of monitoring (October-December, 2007). YPC found, however, that in spite of the greater quantity of coverage afforded the candidates, there existed a drastic contrast in the tone of coverage between the two widely acknowledged frontrunners, ex-president Ter-Petrosian and Prime Minister Sargsian. Out of the 99 editorial references made to Sargsian on the eight TV channels monitored, 93 were positive and only six negative, while LTP drew 72 negative references and zero positive. The "TEAM" Research Center, who conducted the media monitoring with the YPC, reiterated its concern that media coverage of the campaign is centrally orchestrated. (COMMENT: We believe that the improvement in the quantity of media coverage given opposition candidates is a direct result of attention devoted to the matter by our mission and others in the international community. END COMMENT.)

LTP ACTIVISTS BEATEN IN YEREVAN, HOSPITALIZED

131. (U) The opposition daily "Aravot" reported February 8 that three young LTP activists were attacked and severely beaten while

distributing DVDs and leaflets containing campaign materials for the former president. The alleged assailants include Melik Gasparian, head of PM Sargsian's campaign office in the northern Yerevan district of Nor Nork, and three more unidentified individuals. The daily reports that three activists - Hovhannes Grigorian, Gevorg Zakarian and Aghvan Hakobian - were taken to a hospital after the attack, and that the condition of one of them is serious. The daily ran a front-page photo of the activists in the hospital, and reported that the attackers confiscated approximately 200 DVDs and 500 leaflets from the activists. The incident was reported to the police.

PENNINGTON